

Black Self-Determination & Socialist Revolution

A Socialist Action Resolution



The following resolution was drafted in February 1992 and adopted by the July 29-August 2, 1992 Socialist Action convention.

African Americans are an integral part of the American working class. They are also an oppressed nationality, and we support their right to self-determination up to and including the right to form a separate nation. While nationalist aspirations have always been a part of the Black consciousness, whether or not this people sees its interests best served by separate forms of organization and goals or as an integral component of the broader class struggle has been shown by history to be dependent on both objective and subjective factors.

When the white majority is sharply divided, Black Americans might see their interests coinciding with those of this or that sector of the majority. When African Americans sense that allying with one or another sector of a divided white majority serves their interests as a people, they have vigorously responded.

Such a division led to the Civil War, which

ended in the overthrow of the slaveowning class and the abolition of slavery. This second American Revolution – as was the first – was led by this country's capitalists. A de facto alliance was formed between the whole Black people, free and slave, and the opponents of slavery led by Abraham Lincoln, the last of America's capitalist revolutionaries. Lincoln and Northern capitalism were driven further than they intended to go – by Blacks, the abolitionists, and by the logic of the deadly struggle for capitalist supremacy over the slaveholding class.

Black Americans enjoyed a short period of relative political freedom during the period known as "Reconstruction." Black political freedom was the means by which Northern capitalists consolidated their victory over the former slaveholding class.

Shortly after the Civil War, a new alliance was formed between Black and white poor farmers, who made common cause against the large landowners – formerly slaveholders – and Northern bankers. This alliance was crushed by the victorious capitalists, who by 1877 had

concluded peace with the remnants of the old Southern ruling class. Because the old slaveholders were also landlords and owners of private property, including capitalist enterprises employing wage labor, their incorporation into victorious American capitalism was entirely logical and quite easily consummated. Thus the former slavemasters were fully integrated into the expanded American capitalist class.

Once the domination of capitalism over the Southern states was assured, Blacks were soon subjugated once again. This time as a sector, or caste, of super-exploited workers and farmers. And in the rural Southern states the former slaves were eventually placed in a special form of bondage that had features of serfdom. They were chained to the land by the peculiar institution of sharecropping backed up by juridical forms of second-class citizenship.

Many poor white farmers were similarly subjugated by the institution of sharecropping. But as whites, they were able to more easily extricate themselves from the bondage of debt to the landlord. Blacks, however, not having any legal recourse and subject to extra-legal terrorism of KKK other fascistic bands, were chained to the land substantially in the manner of feudal serfs.

“Jim Crow” laws, which constituted the American form of apartheid, were enacted in all the Southern states. African Americans were juridically segregated – a word that barely suggests its terrible consequences. They were denied the right to vote, denied access to all but the hardest and lowest-paid jobs, condemned to inferior, segregated schools and housing, and subjected to a variety of degrading insults of every imaginable kind. These ranged from segregated drinking fountains and toilets – and worse, to a de facto denial of access, more often than not, to these indispensable and vital requirements of modern civic life. There was no arena of public life in which Blacks were not confronted by instances of racial injustice, down to being compelled to stand at the rear of busses until every white rider was seated.

In many cases, while white workers and poor farmers were not the real beneficiaries of Jim Crow laws, they were often among the Blacks’

worst tormentors. How did this come about?

First, those Blacks who had succeeded in becoming independent farmers were driven from their land by naked terrorism. Ku Klux Klan and other fascistic gangs then lynched and burned Blacks out of every occupation but the very worst. And those poor white farmers who had allied themselves with Blacks in a populist movement in opposition to the former plantocracy and Northern bankers also came under attack. The poor whites that dared oppose the extra-legal gangs – many of whom would mobilize in defense of their Black neighbors – were subjected to a dose of the same murder and mayhem inflicted upon Blacks.

Moreover, many poor white workers and farmers were deceived by capitalism, and its agents among them, into believing that they would materially benefit from the oppression of Blacks. While this was sometimes the case, with individuals here and there gaining the better-paying jobs taken away from Black workers, and gaining land at bargain prices taken from Black farmers, the white workers in factory and farm “gained” mainly by not being the immediate target of the terror campaign and all its horrendous consequences.

Then, as all resistance was suppressed, the living standards of white workers’ – and working farmers too – were in most cases also driven down to a level only somewhat better than that of Blacks. The method is similar to the practice of capitalist employers who will pay scabs higher than normal wages – until the strike is broken.

Many workers and farmers, terrorized into a culpable silence or brainwashed into thinking that they would gain economically from the assault against Blacks, were induced by their misleaders to take a more or less active part in the victimization of their class brothers and sisters. But the expected gain was an illusion because by driving down the living standards of Blacks, the standards of all workers – and working farmers too – were driven down. In fact, during the long period when Jim Crow was the law of the land in the Southern states – from the end of the 1870s to the end of the 1960s – Black and white workers in the Jim Crow states

earned wages which averaged considerably lower than their counterparts in the North.

What began in the Southern states eventually was extended to varying degrees everywhere. The capitalist-initiated exclusion of Blacks created an artificial oversupply of Black labor. According to the laws of the capitalist market, this drastically drove down the price of Black labor power (wages).

But capitalist economics also dictated that Blacks thus forced to work for lower wages inexorably undermined the price of labor power for all workers, white as well as Black. White workers were regularly reminded by their bosses, when they showed dissatisfaction with wages or working conditions, that they could be easily replaced by Blacks “only too eager to work for less.”

The absurdly false perception spread, and was insidiously promoted among white workers, that Blacks voluntarily choose to work for lower wages because, racists falsely argued, “as an indolent and inferior race they need less to live on.”

This myth provided the rationale for the treacherous practice of excluding Blacks from unions. It is the privileged labor bureaucracy that led the unions toward self-destructive racist, exclusionary practices. Historically constituting the most backward layers of the workers’ movement, the bureaucracy serves as the main transmission belt into the working class for capitalist ideology. The racist role of the labor lieutenants of the capitalist class helped create the illusion among Blacks that racism derives from the exclusionary policy of white workers and their unions, and not from capitalism.

This myth is relentlessly promoted by the capitalist media and still distorts the perceptions of both Black and white workers despite the fact that white workers also suffer from the generalized reduction in the price of labor power resulting from racist practices. Meanwhile capitalist continues to reap untold billions in superprofits because Blacks are systematically paid below the value of their labor power.

Unfortunately, once in place, the real source of

the racist centrifugal dynamic disrupting the unity of Black and white workers became increasingly harder to perceive.

This opened the door wider to the divide-and-conquer policy of the ruling class. Once the practice of paying Black labor less than white labor had been institutionalized, capitalists could quite easily induce desperate Black workers, alienated by racist union practices, to serve as strikebreakers. Black workers, condemned by capitalism to serve as virtual permanent members of the reserve army of the unemployed – but perceiving it as caused by the racism of white workers – could see no good reason to act in solidarity with striking white workers. This, in turn, contributed substantially to further ingrain racist prejudices against Blacks among the more backward layers of the white working class.

Why Blacks Turned Towards Separatism at the End of the 1870s

By 1876, the re-enslaved Blacks in many Southern states felt betrayed by their former allies among poor whites. They were thus receptive to movements for emigration to sparsely settled areas of the country. The idea of separation was, of course, not new. Blacks were captivated by dreams of going home – back to Africa – beginning with their enslavement in a foreign land.

In 1878, a group organizing an exodus from the Southern states had recruited 98,000 Black victims of racist terror from Louisiana, Mississippi, Alabama, Missouri, and Indiana. But the exodus proved a failure. “The emigrants were attacked and denied transportation by white mobs who realized their importance to the Southern labor Market (From Philip Foner’s “the Life and Writings of Frederick Douglass,” Vol. IV, International Publishers, 1955)

Frederick Douglass, who still had faith in a capitalist-led reformation of the South, had opposed the exodus up until his visit to South Carolina and Georgia in 1888. Soon after his return, he wrote a letter in favor of emigration to one of the leaders of this movement:

“I had hoped that the relations subsisting

between the former slaves and the old master class would gradually improve; but while I believe this, and still have some such weak faith, I have of late seen enough, heard enough, and learned enough of the condition of these people in South Carolina and Georgia, to make me welcome any movement which will take them out of the wretched condition in which I now know them to be. While I shall continue to labor for increased justice to those who stay in the South, I give you my hearty “God-speed” in your emigration scheme. I believe you are doing good work.” (Ibid, Foner.)

A further review of U.S. history from the Civil War to the present day will show that the Black masses have followed the path to freedom that seemed most open to them. Though justifiably suspicious, they tend to readily collaborate with whites when convinced by the action of the potential ally that the alliance serves Black aspirations for freedom. American history has so far shown that it is after betrayal, when the prospects for reliable white allies seems hopeless, that a separatist mood tends to grow.

Such was the case after World War I. Capitalism during the war had encouraged a mass migration of rural Southern Blacks to work in the war-expanded industries in the North. At the same time, however, the capitalists insidiously worked behind the scenes to disrupt instinctive moves towards cooperation between Black and white workers. Capitalists and their agents systematically encouraged the most backward whites to vent their racist spleen against Blacks.

The Ku Klux Klan had steadily spread to the North after the crushing of Black resistance in the South. But it was kept within limits required by the needs of the first imperialist world war. After the war, the Klan-like groups were given the go-ahead when the war industries shut down and unemployment soared. Capitalism, which no longer required Black labor to work in their war industries, unleashed the full fury of its racist shock-troops to prevent a united working-class response to mass unemployment.

The Klan blamed Blacks for the misery of whites thrown on the scrap heap of the jobless. This effectively diverted the ire of the most backward workers from the capitalist criminals

to its Black victims. And, typically, the bureaucratic and often overtly racist misleadership of the unions refused or failed to counter the boss-inspired scapegoating of Blacks.

The Rise of the Garvey Movement

This betrayal led to a renewed wave of nationalism and separatism engulfing the disappointed Black masses. Marcus Garvey’s Universal Negro Improvement Association grew into the largest mass movement of Blacks since the Civil War. The UNIA was more than a “Back to Africa” movement. Garvey tapped the deep sentiment for organizational and economic independence. The growing use of lynch-law throughout the land inspired a movement toward self-defense. Garvey’s organization attempted to meet this desperate need. The UNIA raised an army – which under the conditions the prevailing was essentially symbolic – complete with officers, uniforms, and a “Black Cross” nurses corps. All “for the reconquest of Africa.”

Blacks enthusiastically flocked to the UNIA. They saw the Garvey-led “army,” above all, as a bold and necessary step that they hoped would be filled with real content. At its height the Association numbered several million members and had amassed considerable capital for its independently owned business ventures.

Black Nationalism and Permanent Revolution

Leon Trotsky, who along with V.I. Lenin, led the Russian workers to victory over Russian capitalism in 1917, understood the progressive character of the nationalism of oppressed peoples. Trotsky applied this understanding to Black nationalism in the United States.

Lenin had blazed the trail on this. He taught that the nationalism of the oppressed in a distorted expression of class consciousness – an organic part of the class struggle. The Bolsheviks called for unequivocal solidarity by the workers with the struggles of any oppressed nationality for freedom, justice and equality. After Lenin’s death, Trotsky carried on this defense of true proletarian internationalism and class solidarity.

As early as 1905, Trotsky predicted the course

of the Russian Revolution in his Theory of Permanent Revolution. The working class would first overthrow the capitalist state, Trotsky's theory predicted, and then give its peasant allies the land, dealing a fatal blow to the power of the combined landlord-capitalist class. After thus firmly cementing its alliance with the peasantry, the workers would then go on to destroy the remaining foundations of capitalist power, advancing the socialist character of the revolution.

Trotsky also blazed a trail on the related theoretical principle. He foresaw, 12 years before the Russian Revolution, that the democratic revolution – which includes the right of oppressed nations to self-determination – could only be carried out in the course of a social revolution led by the Russian workers.

Trotsky later went on to generalize the Theory of Permanent Revolution after it was confirmed by the actual course of the October Revolution. In the United States it meant that Black freedom, justice, and equality was impossible so long as the capitalist class ruled; that only a workers' revolution combined with a struggle by Blacks, could liberate the Black people.

In 1939, Trotsky engaged in a discussion about Marcus Garvey and Black nationalism with his co-thinkers in the American socialist movement. After listening carefully to the factual presentations of this American comrades, he argued for an understanding of the entirely progressive sentiment Black nationalism represents. He said:

“The Black woman who said to the white woman [who had just pushed her in a street car], ‘Wait until Marcus is in power. We will know how to treat you then,’ was simply expressing her desire for her own state.

“The American Negroes gathered under the banner of the ‘Back to Africa’ movement because it seemed a possible fulfillment of their wish for their own home. They did not want actually to go to Africa. It was an expression of a mystic desire for a home in which they would be free of the domination of the whites, in which they themselves could control their own fate. That also was a wish for self-determination.”

(“Leon Trotsky on Black Nationalism and Self-Determination,” Pathfinder Press)

Trotsky had earlier explained, “I do not propose for the party to advocate, I do not propose to inject, but only to proclaim our obligation to support the struggle for self-determination if the Negroes themselves want it.”

Indeed to do otherwise would itself be a violation of the right of oppressed people to determine their fate. It would also cast a cloud over the absolute commitment of revolutionary socialists to a united working class based on true equality.

The Rise of the CIO: A Break From Labor's Racist Past

When the mass-production workers began their historic assault on the citadels of American industrial capitalism in the 1930s, they made a profound break from the racist patterns of the past. They had drawn the bitter lessons of the previous harmful policy of the segregationist AFL and other unions; - a policy which led to profound defeats.

The insurgent workers; industrial union movement, organized at first within the AFL, in the Committee for Industrial Organization (CIO), consciously united Black and white, men and women, for the stupendous task of forcing auto, steel, and other giant corporations to kneel to industrial unionism.

The CIO was more than a union. It was a social movement for freedom and equality. This is what gave it its great strength. The CIO also took the first steps in allying itself with Blacks as a people.

As history has proven time and time again, when whites take this road, Blacks naturally respond. And so did virtually the entire Black working class and middle classes – from common laborers to intellectuals and even small business people.

The conquests of this movement – although eroded by the privileged, self-seeking labor bureaucracy – are still alive and remain a source of great potential power. But most important,

labor's giant step forward toward class unity taken in the mid-1930s will inspire it to follow that example again.

The working class has been in retreat for over 40 years – a retreat which has accelerated since 1970. The unions have been crippled by a labor misleadership that foolishly and criminally whines for “unity” with alleged “good” capitalists in place of a struggle against the capitalist class as a whole. A class-struggle policy in which all of capitalism's victims will fight together for economic and social justice is the logical way forward – not “unity” with the capitalist labor-bashers.

A break from the policy of supporting politicians in either capitalist party is indispensable for such a class-struggle policy. An independent labor party based on the unions is the logical political step toward uniting the working class and its natural allies for a generalized struggle. But the labor bureaucracy has obstinately blocked this independent road. This irresistible force of historic necessity, however, will impel labor's rank and file onto the center stage of history. They will be compelled to sweep aside the privileged labor bureaucracy now blocking the road forward.

The aspirations of the Black community toward an independent Black party is an entirely progressive nationalist expression. This is despite the success of the petty bourgeois, pro-capitalist, Black political misleadership that has kept the Black masses chained to the Democratic Party. These fakers, like their counterparts in the labor bureaucracy, are forced to conceal their slavish subordination to the ruling class behind demagogic declarations of independence.

But the coming resurgence of mass labor militancy will pick up where their predecessors left off. A new anti-capitalist alliance of all the dispossessed will arise that will uproot capitalist exploitation and national and sexual oppression.

The Legacy of Malcolm X

Malcolm X's evolution was a precursor of the coming generalized working-class radicalization. He was clearly influenced by the revolutionary events on a world scale which

involved genuine revolutionaries of all colors in a united working class struggle for emancipation from wage slavery. Symptomatically, in his last year, Malcolm X relentlessly attacked the two capitalist parties – both the “Democratic foxes and the Republican wolves.” And in his last months, he more explicitly focused his attack, explaining that capitalism is the fountainhead from which springs racism, super-exploitation and national oppression.

Malcolm X showed in his most mature writings and speeches that he had begun to see the outlines of the coming combined revolution. He showed in his polemics against the capitalist “vulture” that he had begun to sense that the national liberation of his people might only be won in the course of the coming workers' socialist revolution. If for no other reason, this marked him as a candidate for assassination by U.S. capitalism.

The Nation of Islam

Black nationalism remain a powerful current in Black America. The Nation of Islam continues to be the largest Black nationalist force in this country. It remains capable – despite contradictory cross-currents – of making a major contribution to the struggle for Black liberation and to the coming American revolution.

From the start of the U.S. assault on Iraq, the Nation of Islam sharply opposed the imperialist assault in the pages of their newspaper, The Final Call. And since then they have continued to defend those GIs who are still being victimized for their refusal to take part in the criminal military assault on Iraq. But with a few notable exceptions, they took little part in mobilizing Blacks for mass action against the war – mostly limiting themselves to propaganda against the U.S. imperialist assault on Iraq.

The Nation's policy today on many important political questions is not qualitatively different from what it was before Malcolm X was suspended for making his “chickens coming home to roost” comment to reporters in the immediate aftermath of the Kennedy assassination.

But much water has flowed under the bridge

since. Malcolm X began to revise the Nation's backward positions – especially its abstentionist stance toward the integrationist-oriented civil right movement. It is important to note that his evolution began long before his break with Elijah Muhammad.

While he was one of the chief spokespersons of the Nation – well before he was suspended from his position as a major Nation spokesman – Malcolm sought to identify the Muslims with the actual struggle of the Black masses in the South. He began to treat his organization's differences with Martin Luther King and other leaders of the civil rights movement as subordinate to their common struggle against racism in the United States.

This was entirely positive and constituted a major political contribution toward establishing a united Black front against the racist ruling class, which was cut short by his and King's assassinations.

Most importantly, both before and after the split with Elijah Muhammad, Malcolm didn't stand still. He continued to evolve toward a higher conception of the struggle for Black liberation; not the least of which was his ongoing polemic against both capitalist parties and ultimately against capitalism itself. But it would be wrong to say that he ever abandoned his progressive Black nationalist views, or that he was moving in that direction. Malcolm's thinking in his last year confirmed our view that there is no contradiction between Black nationalism and proletarian internationalism.

Even to this day most of the Black "leaders" who have embraced him – not in life, but only after his death – pretend not to have heard his repeated characterizations of the Republicans as undisguised "wolves," and Democrats as sly "foxes" – both in the business of raiding the chickenhouse. Nor do these Johnnie-come-latelys acknowledge his ultimate evolution in the direction of class and socialist consciousness.

This is not to say that the Nation has stood still on the positions they held before Malcolm made his major contributions transforming it from an essentially isolated religious sect into a significant political force.

But their evolution has been quite mixed. In contradiction to progressive stands like the one they took in the Gulf War, they also oppose abortion as Black genocide, they have taken strong positions in favor of such things as the nomination of Clarence Thomas to the Supreme Court, and they display a collateral male chauvinism and opposition to affirmative action. The Nation's opposition to women's rights is sharply counterposed to Black unity.

The Nation's continued reactionary anti-Semitic message is sharply counterposed to true internationalism. While they solidarize in the pages of *The Final Call* with the struggle of Palestinians, the reactionary smell of anti-Semitism is mixed in with their anti-Zionism. And while they denounce white Democrats and Republicans, they are more than a little supportive of both liberal and conservative Black Democrats and Black Republicans.

However, we cannot rule out decisively progressive evolution by this current under the impact of the developing crisis of American and world capitalism. The overwhelming majority of African Americans are working class and most important, there is no Black component of the American capitalist class. There are no Black Rockefellers, Morgans or Fords. There are no Black corporate raiders or Chief Executive Officers of major corporations.

Furthermore, the Black nationality in the United States is unique among oppressed nationalities everyone in the world – they have no indigenous capitalist class or separate Black territory or separate economy to power the tendency of a privileged elite to hold back its revolutionary anti-capitalist dynamic.

The Black section of the American working class has been last to benefit from the long period of relative prosperity, and are now the first to feel the economic lash of the recession. The simple facts of life for Black Americans guarantee that they will be among the first wave of radicalizing class struggle fighters.

We can expect that the logic of capitalist economic life will put the Nation of Islam to a severe test. This formation will not be immune

to the impact of the economic crisis on its constituency. That means that despite the current conservative drift of the Nation of Islam we need to position ourselves for reaching out with a friendly response to any move by it, or by a current within it, in the direction of a consistent struggle for Black liberation.

Only coming events can answer the question of the future role of the Nation of Islam. In the meantime, we are optimistic and remain ready to reach out in friendship and solidarity to this important component of the Black movement for freedom, justice and equality.

The “Integrationist” Wing of the Black Liberation Movement

The “integrationist” sector of the movement of African Americans for social, economic, and political justice has been in decline since the victory over Jim Crow. The assassination of Martin Luther King removed from the scene the most dynamic exponent of that current. Significantly, he was assassinated in Memphis, Tenn., where he had gone to help striking Black sanitation workers win their battle. The dynamic of the Black struggle in the North had led him to embrace the cause of wage slaves in an objective struggle against capitalist exploitation.

Although his pacifist convictions limited King’s effectiveness, he had become a confirmed advocate of mass civil disobedience, which unlike individual acts of civil disobedience alters the basic relations of forces bringing the masses into direct action in the streets. Furthermore, such mass actions pose the question of effective self-defense; they set in motion a logic which must ultimately lead to organized self-defense.

It could be expected, too, that had Martin Luther King lived, he also would have continued his own evolution toward a higher level of political consciousness.

Bet even King’s pacifism was two-sided. His opposition to self-defense served to put the onus of violence on white racism, where it belonged. And unlike many of history’s avowed pacifists who have hypocritically condemned with impartial vigor both the violence of slavemaster and slave, he took a bold stand in opposition to

the Vietnam War policy of American imperialism.

Leaders like King and Malcolm don’t arise every day. Both these men came out of the struggle against the system of legally segregated and second-class citizenship prevailing in the Southern states and the de facto segregation in the North. They both led and learned from the struggles of the masses.

The momentum of the victory over Jim Crow in the early 1960s carried the struggle with ineluctable force to the Northern states, where unofficial forms of second-class citizenship for Blacks is the norm to this day. Segregation, albeit not overtly supported by any special laws, prevails and worsens in housing, schools and jobs. Moreover, separate but unequal is also a fact of life in all other spheres of civic life for Blacks.

Martin Luther King was one of the first, and certainly the most effective of the civil rights leaders that led the struggle into the North. Black super-exploitation and oppression in the Northern cities is openly economic in form and has no juridical framework supporting it other than the framework of the sanctity of capitalist property, and the capitalist law and order upholding it. King didn’t hesitate to respond to the obvious by focusing the struggle “up-South” on the economic forms of racial injustice in the “free” states.

At that moment, in the 1960s, the course of the two major Black leaders began to intersect. Black nationalists like Malcolm X had appeared to be indifferent, even scornful of the fight against Jim Crow. But this was primarily a consequence of their polemics against the hypocrisy of white “liberals” who downplayed the hell caught by Blacks in the North. Black nationalist polemical emphasis was focused on the other side of the truth and thereby illuminated more completely the economic foundation of Black oppression.

Black nationalism, at that time, was also in rebellion against those civil right fighters, who, in their zeal to defeat the abomination of Jim Crow, soft-pedaled racial injustice in the North. Black nationalism was not, in the least,

counterposed to the goals of the civil rights struggle. It was its ideological complement; it constituted another vital component of the generalized struggle, North and South, for Black social, economic and political justice.

It was no accident that when Jim Crow began to show signs of imminent collapse, and the attention of African Americans began to shift to the North, that Malcolm X, sensing this change, also sensed that the army of civil rights fighters were potential enlistees in the ongoing war for freedom everywhere in the United States, North as well as South. It was at that historical moment that Malcolm began to reach out to his erstwhile ideological opponents for collaboration in the struggle.

After Malcolm X's assassination, the needs of capitalism also required Martin Luther King's assassination. The two murders removed from the scene the two most capable leaders produced by the historic upsurge that brought down Jim Crow and who had begun to follow an intersecting logic. Their death, along with the Vietnam War-fueled economic boom and President Lyndon B. Johnson's "War Against Poverty" – which succeeded in coopting, compromising, and corrupting potential Black leadership – contributed to a downturn in the pace of struggle for Black liberation that has essential prevailed to this day.

But now, the steadily rising interest in Malcolm X, combined with the developing economic crisis, augurs a new and higher stage in this struggle.

Most importantly, this new stage, which promises to bring the working class into the struggle for fundamental change, will begin where the two previous upsurges left off. The labor radicalization of the 1930s and 40s, and the Black radicalization of the late 1950s and 60s will tend to merge in a new synthesis. A new alliance between the coming generations of labor militants and Black nationalists is objectively necessary and, therefore, is guaranteed to be given an impulse by the force of historical experience.

It cannot now be determined which strategic road to freedom Blacks will ultimately take:

Whether it will be one that begins on the road to a separate nation or on the road to a united, combined struggle for Black liberation and a socialist America.

Revolutionary Marxists remain neutral on this question – until Blacks have made clear which road is their choice. In our view both roads have made clear which road is their choice. In our view both roads lead to socialist revolution. But Socialist Action's strategic orientation is toward the goal of a united revolutionary party of Black and white workers organized for the purpose of the overthrow of capitalism and for the establishment of a world socialist order. And in the final analysis – whether or not the common struggle of Black and white workers must first pass through a stage of formal separation, Socialist Action is committed to a united revolutionary struggle of the Black liberation movement and the working class for their mutual needs and aspirations.

The Last Year of Malcolm X

George Breitman, the veteran American Trotskyist, made important observations in his book, "The Last Year of Malcolm X." Among other things he closely analyzed Black nationalism. On pages 55 and 56 he writes:

" . . . Black nationalism can be seen as approximately the following: It is the tendency for Black people in the United States to unite as a group, as a people, into a movement of their own to fight for freedom, justice and equality. Animated by the desire of an oppressed minority to decide its own destiny, this tendency holds that Black people must control their own movement and the political, economic and social institutions of the Black community. Its characteristic attributed include racial pride, group consciousness, hatred of white supremacy, a striving for independence from white control, and identification with Black and non-white oppressed groups in other parts of the world."

We can say with confidence that this definition applies not only to such currents as the Nation of Islam, but also to most Blacks who might describe themselves as Black nationalists.

And Breitman makes another insightful

observation. (also on page 56.)

“But it [Black nationalism] also differs in at least one basic respect from both classic nationalism and African black nationalism. The thing that is unique about it [Black nationalism in the U.S.] is that, despite its name, it does not share (or does not yet share) a commitment to a struggle for a separate black nation (what we have above termed “separatism”). One can be both a Black nationalist and a separatist, but one can also be a Black nationalist without being a separatist.”

In the same book Breitman, quotes Malcolm X during an interview with A.B. Spellman (page 60): “Malcolm interjected, when Spellman asked about his program for achieving ‘your goals of separation.’” Malcolm said:

“A better word to use than separation is independence. This word separation is misused. The 13 colonies separated from England but they called it the Declaration of Independence; they don’t call it the Declaration of Separation, they call it the Declaration of Independence. When you’re independent of someone you can separate from them. If you can’t separate from them it means you’re not independent of them.”

Thus, these words make clear that the future course of African Americans is not the choice between integrationism (we use the term for want of a better word) and Black nationalism, but between independence in the struggle along the road to freedom and separation as, at least, a first leg on that road to freedom.

We can safely assume that a very large proportion of integrationists are also for independence but not yet for separation.

Before the discussion with Trotsky referred to at the beginning of this resolution, and before the 1939 Socialist Workers Party convention, the revolutionary socialist movement was not so clear on the matter of independence and/or separation.

The resolution “Freedom Now: The New Stage in the Struggle for Negro Emancipation and the Tasks of the SWP,” adopted by the 1963 convention of the SWP, outlines the evolution of

our position, which remains valid to this day. (This resolution was printed in an SWP pamphlet, “Freedom Now: The New Stage in the Struggle for Negro Emancipation” and published by Pioneer Publishers, in October 1963.) The following selection begins on page 10 of this pamphlet:

Separation and a Separate Nation

“The theoretical position of revolutionary socialism on Negro separatism was first worked out at the Socialist Workers Party convention in 1939. Now, when Black Muslim influence has made separatism a live political issue among many people, it needs to be restated, adapted to current conditions and made unmistakably clear.

In 1939, we foresaw the possibility that the Negro people, as part of their struggle to end centuries of oppression and exploitation, might some day decide that they want a separate nation, controlled and administered by themselves. We said that if this happened, it would settle the long theoretical dispute about whether or not Negroes are a national minority as well as a racial minority, and that we, as supporters of the right of self-determination, would support the Negro demand for a separate nation and do everything in our power to help them obtain it.

In taking this position we did not become advocates of a separate nation, as the Communist Party used to be, nor do we advocate it now. What we advocate is the right of the Negro people to decide this question themselves. All we commit ourselves to do is support their fight to achieve whatever they decide they want, whether it be equality through integration or equality through segregation, or both.

It appeared to us in 1939 that the mass of the Negro people had not yet expressed themselves definitely. Nine years later, in the resolution adopted at our 1948 convention, we noted that the growing “feeling of racial and national solidarity among the Negro people thus far aims solely at acquiring enough force and momentum to break down the barriers that exclude Negroes from American society, showing few signs of aiming at national separatism.” It was clear that the vast majority of the Negroes were

integrationists in the sense that they favored abolition of each and every discriminatory and segregationist device and institution in this country. But we did not take that to mean that the Negro masses had reached a conclusive position for or against separatism. We felt both in 1939 and 1948 that the question was still “open” – that the Negro people might make a different decision about separatism in the future.

By 1963 the situation has changed considerably, but not decisively. On the one hand, the Muslims, the strongest advocates of separatism, have made serious organizational gains and growth of their general influence has been even greater. On the other hand, more Negroes than ever before are actively engaged in assaulting Jim Crow barriers. If such activity makes them integrationists, it is necessary to point out that a profound division of feeling agitates many Negro integrationists. They have mixed feelings of attraction and repulsion in relation to the Muslims.

In general, Negro thought and discussion about separatism and related questions is much more intense than 15 or 24 years ago. But the mass of the Negro people have not yet taken any settled stand on these questions, and we must still await their definitive decision.

Until the Negro masses decide, the SWP neither advocates nor opposes a separate nation. We defend the right of the Negro people to make such a decision. This means we defend the rights of separatists to meet, speak, write and circulate their views and be free from government or vigilante assaults and frame-ups. It means refuting the slander that the Muslims and other separatists are “counterparts” of the White Citizens Councils and the Ku Klux Klan. It means counteracting the widespread but mistaken notion that separation, freely chosen by Negroes, is “equivalent” to segregation imposed by white supremacists.

Our attitude toward separatists, including the Muslims, is a friendly one. We recognize that the mere existence of the Muslims has had healthy effects, pushing rival Negro tendencies to the left and thereby imparting an impetus to even purely integrationist battles. We note with interest that, far from being a hardened sect, the

Muslims have shown capacity during the last year to change in a direction that better serves the interests of all Negroes. However, they have still to develop a program of action for the struggles now taking place.

Where we differ with them, we differ in a friendly way, and we seek collaboration with them on mutually acceptable projects. We make it plain that we are not opposed to separation, if that should be the will of the Negro masses. Instead of attacking separatism as “utopian,” we seek to point out the revolutionary implication of the mass struggle for it and urge its advocates to develop radical methods, tactics and programs as the only way to achieve it. If the Negro people would decide they want to separate, we would openly come out in favor of granting them separation. At the same time we would continue to fight before, during and after any separation which might take place, to abolish all racial inequalities and the cause of such inequalities in the United States. In that sense, we are and will remain integrationists, whatever else happens. We are convinced that the revolutionary struggle for socialism and the establishment of a socialist government will eliminate the basic causes of racial antagonism and create the conditions for equality and integration of all in a new type of living together . . .

The ruling rich are the foremost enemy of the Negro people. The capitalist class introduced the system of racial oppression in this country, first in the form of slavery; they continued under other forms after slavery was abolished; and they maintain it today. The rich initiated and have continued racial oppression because it was and is a convenience in the exploitation of labor, a source of super-profit, and a method for dividing the labor force and disrupting its efforts to unite against its exploiters.

That the responsibility for racial oppression rests on the capitalist class is not at all contradicted by the fact that other sections of the population, including the working class, are infected to one degree or another with race prejudices and poisons. If this were not so, Jim Crow could never have existed. But the capitalist system injected these prejudices into the white workers and reinforced them by granting the white workers concessions and privileges at the

expense of the Negroes. The chief responsibility belongs on the capitalists, not on the workers who go along with racial discrimination and who are themselves victims as well as beneficiaries of racism. It is necessary to ceaselessly combat racist prejudices and practices of the workers too. Yet we must keep in mind that it is not the workers but the capitalists who have the political and economic power in this country and who control the propaganda-information-education-police apparatus. It is an incontrovertible fact that the capitalists have used their power to perpetuate rather than abolish racial oppression . . .

Studying the present trends in the light of the past, revolutionary socialists conclude that racial oppression can be abolished in the United States only if the present capitalist profit system is eliminated and replaced by a system based on production for use. . .

There is no evidence in anything happening now that the capitalists or their government intend to eradicate racial oppression in our time. Even their spokesmen who deplore the situation do not believe it will be eliminated in this century. Their real perspective is not to abolish racism, but modify it, reform it, remove some of its secondary features, repeal laws that make segregation mandatory – and to do this little at a pace so slow it will extend over several generations in a way acceptable to the Southern white supremacists. At the very most, the capitalist goal is to establish throughout the country relations between the races like those that now exist in the North – where formal segregation is not sanctioned or is even prohibited by law, but where the rankest segregation and inequality exist in practice . . .

They are also prepared to grant additional posts and concessions to a thin layer of the Negro middle class in the hope of using them to restrain the Negro people as a whole. Where they cannot buy off opponents, they will use harassment, intimidation and persecution to suppress and break up Negro groups which refuse to submit to the capitalist power structure . . .” (*end of 1963 resolution excerpts*)

This resolution was written before Malcolm X’s split with the Nation. Much in the text

reproduced above – citing the positive development of the Muslims – was mainly based on Malcolm X’s contributions, as is cited in George Breitman’s book referred to earlier. Since the 1963 SWP resolution was written we experienced some two more years of Malcolm’s remarkable evolution. But since his and Martin Luther King’s assassinations, the Black revolution has done little more than mark time.

Subsequent SWP resolutions were mostly conjunctural and served, to update our programmatic positions on the Black liberation movement that flowed from our basic theoretical and political analysis of the African-American people’s struggle for freedom. These adjustments included such things as making the case for a propaganda campaign in favor of an independent Black Party (which we also later applied to Chicanos).

The SWP argued that an independent Black Party – which was not conceived by us as a purely electoral formation – could not only win major concessions from the ruling class, but it could also give a powerful impulse to independent political action by the working class as a whole.

In regard to affirmative action we argued that four centuries of super-exploitation and oppression required special efforts to correct the ongoing wrongs against those so harmed. For a revolutionary workers’ party, however, it is more than a moral question. Affirmative action must be championed by the working class if a united struggle is to be achieved.

Thus we can confirm that the analyses made in the 1963 “Freedom Now” resolution and subsequent resolutions still holds in all essentials. And the prediction in the 1963 resolution, describing the purpose of capitalist concessions to the Black middle class has also been confirmed by an expanded layer of this Black upper crust supporting the status quo.

What Next?

Recurring instances of racist violence against Blacks such as the videotaped gang-beating by Los Angeles cops of Rodney King and the murder of Yusef Hawkins by a Brooklyn lynch-

mob have sparked relatively isolated protests and demonstrations even though mass indignation is widespread.

De facto school segregation is on the rise. The Black component of the fantastically high U.S. prison population keeps rising. In the current recession, Blacks, as usual, are the first to join the growing army of unemployed.

Thus, although the condition of Blacks in America has continued to worsen in recent years, there has not yet been a renewal of the level of struggle which a combination of objective and subjective factors helped bring to a close. Objectively, the civil rights victory and the prolonged period of relative prosperity provided an opening for the Black petty bourgeoisie (middle class) to play an increasing political role in defending the status quo and pacifying the suffering ghetto masses. Subjectively, the assassination of Malcolm X and Martin Luther King eliminated those Black leaders who could have helped maintain the Black offensive.

This will change, but until objective events trigger a new upsurge of Black struggle, revolutionary socialists are primarily restricted to propaganda tasks.

The developing economic crisis is already building up explosive force within the American working class – especially its Black component. Growing unemployment is provoking a profound sense among broad layers of working people that their economic future is more than bleak, that the decades-long decline in living standards threatens to take a catastrophic nose-dive.

The March 22, 1992, edition of The New York Times featured a shockingly frank picture of the hopelessness and intensifying misery of Black and Latino youth locked permanently into the reserve army of the unemployed.

The Times piece by Seth Mydans begins by graphically focusing on the plight of Salvador Martinez, an 18 year old high school dropout from one of the poorest neighborhoods in Los Angeles. The author sums it up in the opening paragraphs. He writes, “he has never held a

steady job, and the more he looks for one the more he thinks he never will.”

Mydans goes on to write:

“Almost half the teenagers in urban poverty areas are unemployed, with young blacks suffering the most . . . And as jobs become scarcer, economists say, poorly prepared black and Hispanic young people are being pushed off the bottom rung of the economic ladder by working-class whites who are themselves being pushed down the same ladder . . .”

The Times author touches on the distorted government statistics on unemployment, especially in the ghettos and barrios: “Last year, the unemployment rate for black teenagers in poor urban areas was 43.4 percent . . . The figure would have been even higher if it included those who make do with part-time work and those who have given up the job hunt altogether. . . The unemployment rate for Hispanic teenagers like Mr. Martinez in poor urban areas was 28.6 percent last year.”

The author observes: “One contributing factor is a dropout rate that rises from 60 percent to nearly 80 percent in some largely black and Hispanic high schools in Los Angeles. Many of these dropouts can barely read and write . . .” The author quotes a teacher who takes note of the vicious cycle of poverty, crime and punishment that has no end: “They may also have a prison record – the scarlet letter of unemployability – and they are locked into communities where there are no opportunities, no jobs . . .”

The Times author also interviewed Shamiena Byrd, a Black high school dropout now working on her high school equivalency diploma and who holds a part-time secretarial job at a day care center. Ms Byrd explains:

“A lot of times, the system doesn’t look at who you are but where you come from . . . Because of the reputation that Watts has, they usually think anybody that comes from Watts, they’re bad . . . I have to say to most girls – most women – around here, they are on welfare. Most of the guys, they sell drugs . . . A lot of people, they feel like, ‘working at McDonald’s, that’s

not going to get me the new car I want, or clothes.' But selling drugs, that's quick money, that's easy."

This report barely touches on the plight of these working-class youth facing an ever more grim future of schools that don't teach and an economy requiring ever-fewer workers.

Clearly, the time-bomb of growing misery is ticking away. But it has not yet been manifested in either new levels of spontaneous protest or organization of struggle. However, the Black communities are becoming increasingly volatile – any spark could set off a new wave of struggle. Moreover, the continuing lag in a generalized response by the working class to the developing crisis increases the likelihood that the coming struggle will flow through the pathways of Black nationalism – in the first stages at least.

The Nation of Islam is especially situated to provide the vehicle for these struggles. And it will come under increasing pressure to do so. If they do, they have in place the organizational foundation for growing into a truly mass movement. But they can accomplish this only if they are able to make the transition from propaganda to action around a program of demands which can mobilize millions of Blacks in a struggle for jobs, control over their communities, and social welfare programs to meet all the needs of their people.

The capacity of revolutionary socialists to positively affect the course of these events should not be underestimated. Our program of transitional demands is perfectly suited to the needs of Black America as well as of the working class as a whole. And however the fightback begins, there is certain to be an interaction between an independent movement by Blacks and a generalized class struggle by working people through their trade unions and other fighting institutions yet to be established.

In fact, socialist literature and slogans, especially explaining the demand for a shorter workweek with no reduction in pay and other transitional demands, will make increasing sense both to those Black workers taking the

nationalist road and to the working class as a whole.

On the Threshold of a New Period of Class Struggle

A new period of class struggle in which Blacks are certain to play a central role is on the horizon. When it arrives it will pose new challenges to American workers and to the Black struggle, which may settle the as yet unresolved question of which road to freedom will be chosen by the masses of Black Americans.

If history is any guide we can expect that the coming insurgency of the American working class will once again spur it to reach out to its natural allies – primarily Blacks, Latinos and women. We can also confidently look forward to a natural reciprocal response from Blacks and the other oppressed sectors victimized by capitalism, whose suffering will also intensify.

In such a period of heightened class struggle and ascending political consciousness, Socialist Action's program will enable us to play a role far greater than our size would otherwise indicate. We are in position to be decisive in seeing to it that the next big opportunity to achieve unity in the class struggle is not ruined by reformists and other agents of capitalism inside the working class. We will work uninterruptedly for such a unification in a common struggle by the whole proletariat for workers' power and socialist revolution – which ever road to liberation the Black masses decide to take.

If we fail, and chauvinism within the workers' movement blocks or breaks up a developing alliance between Blacks and the working class as a whole, our task will be harder. But which ever road history chooses we have every reason to be optimistic, and confident that we will succeed in the closely connected tasks of building our party and advancing the class struggle to a final victory for workers' power and socialism – to the final abolition of all forms of capitalist injustice.